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ABSTRACT

The increasing divorce rate, along with other circumstances resulting in one-parent families, makes the study of the effects of living in a one-parent situation for children of crucial importance. Children of divorced parents have been characterized as having lower I.Q. scores, more behavior problems, and academic handicaps than children from two-parent families. Factors related to life in a one-parent family have been correlated with juvenile delinquency and the possibility of girls dropping out of high school. Data support the concept that life in a happy one-parent family is less damaging to children than life in a conflict-ridden two-parent family. One-parent children have been found to be more independent but otherwise similar in all respects to children from intact families. (Author)

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IS LIFE IN A ONE-PARENT FAMILY DAMAGING TO CHILDREN?
A Look at Both Sides

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I. Background of the Problem

The divorce rate has increased since 1965. 40% of today's marriages will end in divorce. Close to 50% of the children born in the 1970's will spend some time in a one-parent home. Most of these children will live with their mothers. 10% will live with their father (Hetherington, 1979).

In the United States about 70% of one-parent households are created by voluntary separations. About 14% are widowed. 10% were never at any point married to their children's other parents. Temporary separations (hospitalized or military service etc.) account for the remaining 6% (Weiss,1979).

These trends in family patterns have made the study of the effects of living in a one-parent situation for children of critical importance.

II. Statement of the Problem

Living in a one-parent situation is destructive to the social, emotional, and intellectual growth of children.

III. Arguments in Favor

Efforts by Herzog and Sudia (1973) and others have helped to identify different variables related to behavior problems in single-parent children. These variables are the sex of the child, the child's age at the time of the loss, whether or not the parental loss resulted from some voluntary action, and which parent has been lost from the home environment. Frequent crying and increased withdrawal from group activity has been reported following separation from the mother (Landis,1960). Fewer girls demonstrated these behaviors than boys at each age studied.

Stolberg (1973) found that children of one-parent families due to death showed withdrawn and depressed behavior. Children of one-parent families due to divorce exhibited more acting out behavior.

Twenty percent of the children involved with a primary prevention facility had histories of parental loss as compared to ten percent in the general public (Stolberg, 1973). Referral to the prevention facility was due to behavior problems which were interferring with academic involvements.

One-parent children were observed to engage in more dyadic conversations with male peers during non-academic periods than were two-parent children (Ellison, 1979). In fact, Ellison found that as the frequency of proxemic, tactile, and verbal contact with male peers decreased, academic disability rating increased for single-parent children. Studies from Freud and Dann (1951) indicate that peer attachments can compensate for interrupted paternal relationships for single-parent children. An increase in verbal behavior for female single-parent children becomes disturbing because she must deviate from her normal same-sex bonds to increase her contact with male peers (Ellison, 1979).

Two years after divorce, Hetherington (1978) found teachers and peers to play a more important role than were parents in shaping children's adjustment and social behavior in school. Teachers rated single-parent children as being more academically disabled than two-parent children according to Ellison (1979).

Kelly and Wallerstein (1979), in their study of 131 children ages three to eighteen at the time of their parent's separation, from middle class families, found a common theme of sadness and yearning in the children. These characteristics were shown in school by restlessness, sighing, concentration difficulties, narrowing of interests and creativity, and various physical complaints. Fewer than 10% of the children were relieved by their parent's actions.

In the classroom, Ellison found that single-parent children

were less able to shift their gaze direction behavior to meet the changing demands of the classroom situation. One-parent children were also observed to look toward the teacher more often during quiet, independent, academic work time.

A number of studies point to the lowered academic performance of single-parent children (Shinn, 1978). Shinn reports that there is a considerable difference in cognitive performances between intact and one-parent families; "...from 0.2 to 1.6 years in achievement, from 0.2 to 0.9 standard deviation units in I.Q. and aptitude and from 0.8 of the difference between 'B' and 'C' in grade point average." (Shinn, 1978, p.5).

Pedersen et. al. (1979) maintain that the father plays an important indirect role that is qualitatively different than any other adult. Part of his role is to support the mother in her parenting role through economic aid, emotional support, and appreciation of her role as a mother. The father may have a more direct role in shaping children's behavior as a model. In a single-parent family there is only one parent to accomplish these functions. A mother and father are more likely to exhibit wider ranging interests, skills, and attributes than a single parent.

As boys grow older, father availability becomes increasingly correlated with I.Q. scores (Hetherington, 1978). Father availability reinforces a greater bond among family members, a wider variety of activities and experiences, and an increase in the amount of child-parent verbalization. All of these factors would seem to be related to school achievement (Sciara and Jantz, 1974).

Intellectual performance in preschoolers was not found to be affected by factors related to a one-parent experience. It was as these same children were tested as they grew older that the deficits emerged (Hess, Shipman, Brophy, and Bear, 1968). A six

or seven-year-old in a single-parent situation may feel that his family is abnormal and might generalize these feelings to his self-concept. Much work has been done regarding the importance of self-concept related to school success (Bentley, 1975).

Eighteen items were identified to measure school performance to initiate a study of one-parent vs. two-parent children in 26 schools by Kettering Foundation and National Association of Elementary School Principals. The study was conducted the first semester 1979-1980 school year. It covered 8,556 students both elementary and high. The purpose of the study was to discern the impact that living through the dissolution of the family has on children.

The data reflected differences in school achievement, tardiness, absenteeism, truancy, discipline problems, suspensions, expulsions, and dropouts.

Percent of tardiness was higher for one-parent children.

One-parent children were suspended twice as often when compared to two-parent children.

One-parent children moved from school to school more often than did two-parent children.

More than half of truarts came from one-parent homes.

High school children from one-parent families were the only ones expelled. One-parent children accounted for one-fourth of the school population and 40% of the number of dropouts (Brown,1980).

Almost all of the studies show a high percentage of delinquents or adult criminals as coming from broken homes. Case histories and statistical studies both have pointed to the broken home as an important factor in personality maladjustment (Weeks, 1940).

Poor maternal control, inconsistency, and family disorganization seem to be particularly important long term predictors of

impulsivness in children in single-parent families(Hetherington, 1978), lower socioeconomic attainment (Duncan et.al., 1972), and with higher marital instability (Bumpass and Sweet, 1972).

Forced military separations also lead to clinically observable reactions in children. By age fifteen, 85% of the children referred to an Army psychiatry clinic will have experienced long-term separation from their fathers. Data pointed toward a cumulative influence on the disturbed child regardless how subtle it might appear within a single period of absence (Weiss, 1979).

Marital separation and its negative effects on the preschooler

In a study of sixteen preschool children ages three to five in a private nursery school, 62% of the children whose parents were undergoing divorce exhibited what teacher observers felt were acute behavioral changes (McDermott, 1968). Likewise, Wallerstein and Kelly (1975) found negative reactions by preschoolers to their parent's divorce. They characterized the children as being anxious and aggressive. The children were dominated by feelings of sadness, grief, fear, deprivation, and anger.

Preschool boys are found to be less masculine and more feminine in self-concepts and sex-role preference (Hetherington, 1978). Their play patterns also exhibit feminine characteristics.

Using the Beyley Mental Developmental Index, father-absent male infants were found to be deficient in early cognitive skills and motivational characteristics when compared to father-present males of the same age (Pederson, Rubenstein,and Yarrow, 1979). The Beyley Index measures infant responses and secondary circular reactions. (The infants tendency to repeat behavior which produces interesting results.) Pederson et.al. found that infants whose fathers interacted more frequently with them also showed a greater

interest in new stimuli. Interest in new aspects of the environment is an early stage of learning.

Marital separation and its negative effects on boys

The effects of divorce appear to be more damaging to boys than girls (McDermott, 1968). Boys show more problems in interpersonal relationships at home and at school. They receive less positive support and their behavior is criticized more by parents, teachers, and their peers (Hetherington,1979).

In a 1973 study, Hetherington found a greater amount of acting out behavior by single-parent children than two-parent children; single-parent boys more so than single-parent girls. Less appropriate sex role attitudes were found in boys from families where one of the parents had died than in boys from one-parent families created by other reasons.

Blanchard and Biller, in their 1971 study, predicted that the degree of father availability would be positively related to their son's academic achievement and to grades. Their findings revealed that the academic performance of the high father-present group was superior compared to the boys who came from early father-absent, late father-absent, or father-present situations with low father availability. Further, in every comparison, the father-present group out-performed the early father-absent group. The comparisons were made in overall achievement test grade equivalent scores, paragraph meaning, word meaning, spelling, language usage, language total, science and social studies, mathematical concepts, mathematical problems, mathematical total, and teacher's grades.

Boys from mother headed families have been characterized as being more dependent, less masculine, more feminine in self-concepts and sex role preferences, and as less aggressive than boys from intact families (Hetherington, 1978).

Verbal scores outreach problem solving and quantitative scores on I.Q. tests (Oshman, 1975). Shinn (1977) attributes this phenomenon to a lack of a male model, hence a more feminine pattern of cognitive skills, to the fact that tension interferes more with problem solving than verbal skills, and to the fact that there are fewer adults in the home for the child to interact with.

Hetherington (1978) has found that a warm, well functioning mother can counteract the effects of a poor father relationship. A well functioning father who does not live with the family cannot counteract the negative effects of an immature or rejecting mother. This lack of effective buffering by the father in divorced families increases over time and is especially apparent two years after the divorce. Boys seem especially victimized when conflict continues after divorce.

In a two-parent family, a good relationship with one parent can protect the child to an extent from the damage done by a poor relationship with the other parent (Rutter, 1977). This protection is less likely to occur in a single-parent situation where the child sees his non-custodial parent only occassionally or not at all. This seems to indicate that the mother's adjustment and the quality of the mother-child relationship will more directly reflect the adjustment of the child.

Marital separation and its negative effects on girls

A higher percentage of broken homes has been found in delinquent populations. A higher percentage of broken homes has been noted in female delinquent cases than in male cases(Weeks, 1940).

A correlation between dropping out of high school and living in a one-parent family exists. Various factors of life in a one-parent family have been identified as being related to the likelihood that girls may not complete high school. Among these factors are: the length of time ever lived in a one-parent family, level of family income during the high school years, educational level of the mother, and the girl's knowledge of the world of work. Low income has been found as the most significant factor in the

probability of a daughter dropping out of high school (Shaw, 1979):

	Mother Did Not Complete High School		Mother Did Complete High School		
Average Family Income	Always Intact Family	Ever Single-Parent Fam.	Always Intact Family	Ever Single Parent Family	
$3,000	.22	.39	.04	.21	WHITE
7,000	.21	.29	.03	.11	
11,000	.19	.18	.01	.00	
$3,000	.32	.47	.25	.40	BLACK
7,000	.24	.31	.17	.24	
11,000	.16	.15	.08	.08	

PROBABILITY THAT A DAUGHTER WILL NOT COMPLETE HIGH SCHOOL BY INCOME LEVEL, AND BY MOTHER'S EDUCATION AND MARITAL HISTORY

When the girls are interviewed the main reason they give for dropping out of high school is early childbearing. This reason is stated more often by girls from one-parent families than by girls from intact families (Moore and Hofferth, 1978). Moore and Hofferth believe that the lack of a father to play the traditional supervisory role may be the reason.

Other factors may contribute to the possibility of girls dropping out of high school. In a one-parent situation a daughter may receive less parental attention alongwith an increase in family responsibility if her mother begins working. The social stigma against children from one-parent families can also be imposed by neighbors, schools, and other organizations (Brown, 1980).

IV. Arguments Against

Preschool children who develop in a conflict ridden intact family have more problems than those in a single-parent mother headed family (Hetherington,1978; Landis,1960).

The age of the child at the time of the separation from his father has been found to be important in determining the possibility of future behavioal problems. No differences have been observed by Biller and Bahm (1970) if the separation occurred after the child's fifth birthday.

Herzog and Sudia (1970) reviewed the literature on father absence and concluded that it was unlikely that father absence alone was the cause of poor school achievement, if other variables such as SES and the type of father absence were controlled.

One study by Mackie et. al. (1967) of 60 preschool children from low income black families found that even though the income of the father-present families was almost double the income of the father-absent type, the correlation between income and I.Q. was only .17.

A study of 200 fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade children from low income families found that the broken home factor was not related to their lower scores on the achievement test (Deutsch, 1960).

Little difference in intellectual development has been noted time and time again. Research indicates that children whose parents remained unhappily married were worse off than those of divorced parents. No significant differences have been noted in comparisons of proxemic and tactile behavior between one-parent and two-parent family children (Ellison, 1979).

Regardless of the time girls were separated from their fathers, no sex role disruption occurred. Boys separated from their fathers after age five showed no sex role disruption either (Hetherington, 1978). Hetherington continues that girls who remain in high discord families become greater attention seekers, whiners, and they become more demanding both at home and in school.

In a study of divorced families, Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978) report that some of the parents believed that their relationships with their children had improved after their divorce. Hetherington (1978) found children of divorced parents to be more independent in school and at home because of the anxiety experiences which they had undergone at the time of their parents divorce.

V. Findings Suggested by the Research

Adversaries to single-parent families support their position with the following points:

-Females must deviate from their normal same-sex bonds to increase male peer contact.

-The father is no longer present as a support to the mother or his children.

-Research shows that I.Q. test scores tend to be lower.

-Teachers rate single-parent family children as academically handicapped.

-The child loses an important two-parent experience.

-Tests show that children from one-parent families as being academically handicapped.

-Behavior problems for single-parent family children are more apt to occur.

-The chances of a girl dropping out of high school are increased.

Advocates of the benefits of single-parent families support their position with the following points:

-Research supports the idea that it is better for a child to grow up in a happy single-parent family than to survive in a marriage of discord.

-After age 5, no destructive characteristics can be traced to life in a single-parent family.

-There may be other variables beside that of living with one parent that leads to delinquency in single-parent children.

-There were no differences in proxemic and tactile behavior patterns between one- and two-parent children.

-Through interviews, parents have stated that the relationship with their children had improved after divorce.

-Going through divorce seems to develop a sense of independence in the child.

VI. Personal Synthesis

It is easy to see that there are conflicts in the information provided to us by research into the area of the effects of a single-parent experience for children.

This author believes that individual cases need to be scrutinized before the situation can be labeled as beneficial or deliterious.

Much of the research which was reviewed was incomplete in terms of the requirements of a conclusive study. Control groups, follow-up work and the like were completely missing. Many of the ideas were formulated after observation. Very little measurement was done. Many of the variables that were studied do not lend themselves to measurement by their very nature.

A wide variety of studies do not exist in this area. A core of a few works were referred to again and again by various writers.

Of the research presented, the volume supporting the idea that life in a single-parent family is destructive to children's growth would seem to indicate at least a trend of reality.

The point by the opposing side pertaining to the fact that it could well be other aspects other than living without a father as far as delinquency or lower academic achievement is a good one. That area needs further research.

Lastly, another area that needs further research is the effects of a one-parent experience specifically with young children below age five. All of the research claimed that there are negative effects on the young child.

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